

From Wangaratta to Mars

The ambition of four North East education providers to boost digital participation and ability in the region has taken students to America and inspired them to shoot for the stars.

In 2016, Galen Catholic College teachers, Maree Timms and Bernadette Albertson were concerned about the numbers of students engaging in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths).

The teachers decided to work with colleagues at Charles Sturt University, North East Tracks Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) and GOTAFE, to put on a STEM Expo. The four partners, known as the Digital Technology Advisory Committee (DTAC) have since put Wangaratta on the map for all things tech.

The success of the Expo led to 30 different activities such as coding programs and science labs, including VEX Robotics. VEX Robotics is a kit designed to introduce students and adults to the world of robotics.

On the back of this progress, the organisers of the VEX national competition for schools chose Wangaratta to host its first regional competition. In the second year the Galen students won the competition, beating their metropolitan peers.

"Our regional team absolutely excelled beyond our wildest dreams and we won the excellence award which meant an automatic qualification to attend the VEX Worlds competition," Ms Timms said.

"Their tenacity has shown that regional kids can do anything they want."

In addition to the tech, coding, leadership, public speaking and teamwork skills that the program nurtures, the students have also learnt the power of networks.



Many individuals and groups have reached out to the team; one example has a local connection.

"A Wangaratta resident heard about our program and got in touch to let us know that her son, who had gone to the Wangaratta High School, would soon be in Whorouly testing the Monash University's Mars Rover entry and a connection was made. They were very generous with their time and the Galen students got to spend a couple of hours with them. This, and the visit to NASA after competing in America, has shown the kids how well the world can work."

Year 11 student and mentor, Rutvik Chaudhary had his career sights set on joining the defence forces before he got involved in the VEX program.

"After going to the worlds (competition) we had the chance to go to NASA and that really opened up my eyes to the opportunities that exist, and now I am definitely thinking more about space or aviation," Rutvik said.

"For all the kids, the program has shown them alternatives and clarified pathways that they, and their parents, may not have known about," Ms Timms said.

Parents are seeing the difference in their children's involvement in school too. Cathryn Carboon, mother to two boys taking part in the VEX program said the benefits are many.

"It's been incredible! As a parent you want your children to be challenged in their education; it's really changed their lives and the way the eldest now looks at his career options. It's so much more than just robotics. It's about communication, leadership and teamwork skills. They want to be here, even during school holidays. Now we live and breathe VEX robotics - it's pretty much become our life too," Ms Carboon said.

www.dtac.zone

You can read more case studies from this region at www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-partnerships/ovens-murray/projects

Interested in relocating to North East Victoria? Contact Regional Development Victoria <https://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/victorias-regions/hume>



The DTAC collaboration continues to develop, bringing in additional partners and in May 2018, the Victorian Government announced \$300,000 funding to establish the Wangaratta Digital Hub.

In September DTAC's efforts were recognised in the Tech Diversity Awards, receiving the High Commendation award from the Minister for Innovation and the Digital Economy, Philip Dalidakis.